

Agnes Cuming lectures 2010-11

Terence Irwin 'Love Your Neighbour AS yourself'

'To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of ... morality.' (Adapted from John Stuart Mill.)

The second of the Great Commandments has often been taken to sum up the aspect of morality that concerns the right way to treat other people. But what does it mean? Some of the central questions that have concerned moral theologians and moral philosophers are: (1) What is meant by 'love' here? (2) Is it reasonable to command us to love? Is love the sort of thing that one can be ordered to do? (3) How should we understand 'neighbour'? (4) How should we understand 'as yourself'? (5) Once we understand this principle, should we accept it? Is it really the 'ideal perfection of morality'?

The lectures will discuss these questions, with special emphasis on the fourth question. Two interpretations of 'as yourself' have been defended: (A) The command includes a command to love yourself. It means: you ought to love yourself, and you ought to love your neighbour in the way you love yourself. (B) The command does not include a command to love yourself, but it requires a restraint on self-love. It means: you already love yourself, but you ought to love yourself less and your neighbour more. These two interpretations express two different evaluations of self-love and its relation to morality.

We will trace some of the history of debates about self-love and morality from Augustine to Kierkegaard, with special emphasis on Thomas Aquinas (as a defender of Interpretation A) and Martin Luther (as a defender of Interpretation B). The main focus of the lectures will be philosophical rather than historical. Discussion of these interpretations will lead us into debates about the nature and value of self-love and its proper relation to the love of others.